

Practice Report

Student Attitudes Towards Vocabulary Learning: An Online System

Shannon KIYOKAWA

Vocabulary is, of course, essential for language learning. Finding an effective and efficient approach for students to acquire vocabulary in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context is challenging. Finding a good balance for all components of a communication class can be difficult. This paper reports on a class vocabulary study component that was changed from a paper-based vocabulary text to an online vocabulary learning system. A student questionnaire results are considered and student attitudes towards this change are discussed. The results showed that overall the students held positive attitudes towards the change. Finally, a representative selection of student opinions taken after the continued use of the online system are given. Student comments show a continued belief that the system is beneficial to them.

Introduction

Without grammar a student can't say much but without words a student can't say anything. A proper knowledge of both is necessary for students to become competent language users. The direct study of vocabulary has always been a part of this university's English department's curriculum. Balancing how much time to allocate for each component in a class can sometimes be tricky. Two years ago, it was decided that more time for speaking activities was needed for the Listening and Speaking classes. It was felt that vocabulary is a subject that lends itself to a self-study approach to learning. Hence, a decision was made to move from a text-based vocabulary study component to an online vocabulary learning program. This would allow for the bulk of the vocabulary study to be done as homework thus freeing up class time which could then be spent on speaking. This paper reports on this online vocabulary learning program and the results of a student questionnaire conducted after the change from text-based vocabulary study to online. Finally, it comments on the continued use of WordEngine and students' attitudes towards it.

Background

The online vocabulary learning system called WordEngine was chosen. WordEngine is a statistics-based online vocabulary study program. It works by first assessing each student's vocabulary level through a short quiz, and then targets vocabulary at their level based on statistics about word-frequency.

Each student studies different vocabulary based on their level, and vocabulary can

be targeted to match standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC or Eiken. It contains approximately 50,000 words and offers students nine courses to choose from: General English, TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, CEFR, Eiken, Entrance Exams, Business English and SAT and GRE. A selection of Spoken Expressions courses is also available: Daily Conversation, Presentations, Internal Meetings, Business Negotiations, Hospitality and Phonetic Discernment. Each course contains a pre-selected subset from the total 50,000 vocabulary items. In general, students study words using simple three-option multiple choice questions through either Japanese translations or English definitions.

WordEngine uses spaced repetition to promote long term retention of all new words learned. Spaced repetition makes use of the psychological concept of the spacing effect. What is now known as the spacing effect was first theorized by psychologist Dr. Hermann Ebbinghaus (cited in Baddeley, 1982). He found that learning and, most importantly, retention of new information was greater when it took place over a longer time period. For example, one would be able to retain more knowledge if they read a book over one week than if they read the entire book in one night. A practical application of this approach is Sebastian Leitner's (1972) set of six cardboard boxes used to sequence vocabulary flashcards over Ebbinghaus' time intervals. A goal of the WordEngine system is to promote retention beyond short term memory, an issue which has been a concern of language learning (Leitner, 1972, Mondria & Mondria-De Vries, 1994).

Over the course of using the program, students review vocabulary based on the multi-boxes method in which they are presented with the words for review at gradually increasing time intervals. Words are presented online, and students click the meaning of the word they think is correct. If they are right, the word will be re-presented the following day, then three days later, 10 days later, one month later and finally, three months later. If on the last time the word is presented the correct definition is chosen, the student is then said to have acquired the word and it will no longer be presented. If the student makes a mistake at any time during the five reviews, the word then returns to the beginning pile of unknown words and the process begins again. This process is illustrated in Fig. 1.

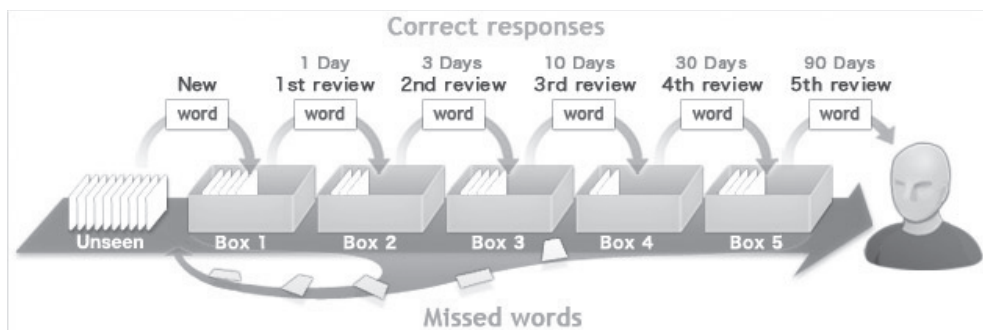


Fig. 1

While most would agree that a holistic approach to language learning is necessary for fluency in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. There are arguments that

deliberate teaching of the most common English words is necessary at the beginning of language learning, therefore, there are undeniable benefits to the use of spaced repetition for language learners (Webb, 2007).

Experience in Class

WordEngine was introduced from April 2018 to both 1st and 2nd year students. Each student took the V-check placement test provided free online. Students were asked to enroll in the General English, Daily Conversation and Phonetic Discernment courses. They were set the goal of 400 correct responses per week. Students have the option of studying using “flash words” or the “word panic” games. Flash words are digital flash cards with built in spaced repetition. “Word panic” is a series of retro-style games where you win by getting the correct answers before time runs out. After every study session a student can see the number of correct responses they have made and check the meaning of the words they missed. Students are encouraged not to wait until just before the weekly goal deadline to study but to study a little bit every day. In general, 10 minutes of study per day is recommended. Students were given 10 minutes at the beginning of every Listening and Speaking class and teachers made comments about the overall performance of students. 30% of the class grade was assigned to WordEngine with students required to complete WordEngine homework 12 weeks of the semester. The exact grade depended on the number of weeks the WordEngine weekly goal was met.

Vocabulary Questionnaire

To explore student's attitudes towards this new method of vocabulary study, at the end of the spring semester a short questionnaire was given to the 2nd year students (See Appendix 1). It dealt with their experience of using WordEngine for their vocabulary study versus their 1st year vocabulary textbook and weekly quizzes. The survey was written in both English and Japanese and answers were allowed to be given in either English or Japanese. The survey consisted of 7 items. Items 1 to 6 used a five-point Likert scale with anchor points of 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. The remaining item was a multiple choice and free answer. 30 students participated in the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

The results of the questionnaire follow:

Questions	Average Response
1. I learned a lot of useful vocabulary this semester. 今年はたくさんの役に立つ語彙を学びました	4.3
2. I enjoyed the way I studied vocabulary this semester. 私は今年語彙を学ぶ方法を楽しんだ	3.5
3. The way we studied vocabulary this semester matches my learning style. 今年の語彙を学ぶ方法は私の学習スタイル	3.9
4. I feel I can remember and am able to use most of the vocabulary I studied this semester. 私は覚えていると感じて使用することができます今年私が勉強した語彙の大半	3.0
5. I prefer last year's vocabulary learning style to this semester's vocabulary learning style. 今学期の語彙学習方法よりも、昨年度の語彙学習方法の方が好きだ	3.1
6. I prefer this semester's vocabulary learning style to last year's vocabulary learning style. 昨年度の語彙学習方法よりも、今学期の語彙学習方法の方が好きだ	3.6

Item 7

PLEASE CHOOSE A or B (AかBのどちらかを選んで回答を記述してください。)

A: I prefer last year's vocabulary learning style to this semester's vocabulary learning style because.....

今学期の語彙学習方法よりも、昨年度の語彙学習方法の方が好きだ。なぜなら……。

B: I prefer this semester's vocabulary learning style to last year's vocabulary learning style because.....

昨年の語彙学習方法よりも、今学期の語彙学習方法の方が好きだ。なぜなら……。

Although Questions 5 and 6 did not provide a very clear preference with an average of 3.1 out of 5 indicating a preference for the textbook style and 3.6 out of 5 for WordEngine. Item 7's multiple choice question provided a clearer picture. Six students choose "A" indicating they preferred the textbook and weekly quiz while 24 students choose "B" indicating a preference for WordEngine. The following are selected representative comments taken from this item on the questionnaire. The comments were written in either English or Japanese by the students. All comments written in Japanese have been translated.

For students that chose "A" which was the previous year's textbook and weekly quiz style, comments included "*Last year's easier*", "*It easy to understand for me*" "*It was hard to do WordEngine*". These comments could indicate that student's vocabulary level was higher than the text level and/or that they didn't completely understand how WordEngine works. "*It is not fun this year*" perhaps shows a preference for a more cooperative approach. The previous year's textbook included in class pair work to check exercises and review words. "*I took a quiz every week*" could indicate the need for testing to stay motivated. "*Sometimes WordEngine wasn't working. WordEngine was good idea but, I don't like it.*" This comment might be stemming from a problem with the student's internet connection. There were no other complaints

about WordEngine not working.

For students that chose “B”, comments included *“You can study anywhere and anytime, so it’s convenient”*, *“In the week, you can decide when you want to study, so it’s easy to use.”* *“You can work at your own pace and decide where and when, so it’s convenient.”* These comments and other similar ones about when and where students could use WordEngine show that being able to use it outside of class and outside of school hours was an important point for them and suited their individual schedules. *“I can use it on my iphone.”* This comment shows that having a choice of devices that WordEngine can be used on was important to students. It allows for variety of access.

“I can remember the words better because I can do them many times.” *“The words are repeated so it’s easy to remember”* WordEngine uses the theory of spaced repetition, which allows for students to benefit from the repetition of words that they have not yet learned completely.

Another comment was *“Because I can see the mistake words after I finish, why I mistake I understand and I have remember chance”* This comment shows students take advantage of the various features of WordEngine to enhance their learning.

“The study is efficient.” This comment shows that students feel that the system is a time-effective way to learn new vocabulary. This is especially important because many students have extremely busy schedules with classes, work and extracurricular activities. It’s important for motivation that students feel their valuable time is being well spent.

“It’s easy”, “It’s comfortable”, “WordEngine is enjoyable” These comments could represent student’s feelings toward the suitability of WordEngine with regard to their learning style which was also shown in Question 3 of the questionnaire. It could also indicate their enjoyment of the various activities that also include a game-like presentation. This could create a more relaxed atmosphere for learning which can help to lower apprehension in students. It can also give them a feeling that Word Engine is different from traditional academic methods of vocabulary learning.

“It allows for more speaking time in class.” *“This semester’s class has many opportunities for speak and listening.”* These comments show that students value the opportunities for additional speaking that WordEngine allows by freeing up class time that was previously spent on in-class vocabulary study.

Results and Considerations

The questionnaire results showed an overall positive attitude towards WordEngine and it was decided to continue its use to provide vocabulary study for the Listening and Speaking classes. WordEngine has now been used for over 2 years in our 1st and 2nd year Listening and Speaking classes. End of the semester feedback questionnaires provide students the opportunity to assess and comment on their classes. For both 1st and 2nd year, there has been no negative feedback on the WordEngine component of their classes. Students are also required to create a course reflection portfolio (CRP) at the end of each semester in which they reflect on their learning from the class. Comments from these CRP’s also show a positive

attitude towards their learning with WordEngine. Representative comments from these CRP's include:

- *"I did Word Engine every day. I learned a lot of words. I think that I acquired a lot of words. Now my accuracy rate is 81%. My goal accuracy rate is 90%."*
- *"I can remember more difficult word because I did Word Engine."*
- *"I sometimes forgot about the weekly word engine when I was in the first year, but I only forgot once for all this semester."*
- *"I did Word-Engine hard but couldn't finish it once. My goals for next semester are increasing my vocabulary because I could speak English and understand it. I want to continue Word-Engine every week."*
- *"We also did WordEngine in this class. This helped me because I increased my vocabulary. I want to increase my vocabulary."*
- *"I want to increase my knowledge of English words through the Word Engine. In the word test, I got 70-80% points every time."*
- *"I think I never forgot Word Engine every day, so I improved vocabulary."*
- *"Outside of class, I never forgot to complete the 490 words goal of WordEngine every week and often checked wrong answer meanings of words. So, I could get over 15 points in this test every time."*
- *"The WordEngine test is good for me. Because I can remember many words and the score is not so bad."*
- *"Using WordEngine, I have increased my vocabulary. I did 490 words until every Sunday mid night. Then we have a WordEngine test every Tuesday. I can totally remember words."*

According to data taken from the WordEngine weekly report the average increase in vocabulary for 1st year students at the end of last semester after 15 weeks of study was 717 words. The average increase in vocabulary for 2nd year students at the end of last semester after 45 weeks of study was 2,464 words. The average weekly goal completion rate for 1st year students last semester was 85% and for 2nd year students it was 88%. Often it was the same students who were not able to meet the weekly goal. After questioning those students as to why they were unable to meet the weekly goal, most replied that they could not remember to do this homework. Suggestions were then given for example, set an alarm on your phone at an appropriate time for you to do this homework. After you hear the alarm, do WordEngine. Another suggestion was to make a WordEngine buddy who would remind them to do this homework. Many of these students only showed limited improvement after receiving the suggestions. This is an area where further improvement needs to be made.

The change we made from a textbook based in-class vocabulary study component to an online vocabulary learning system that employs spaced repetition has worked well for us and student attitudes remain positive. Ways to address the problem of students repeated failure to meet the weekly goal due to a failure to remember need to be explored. Our overall success with this system would indicate it could be a possible alternative for other teachers who are wanting to create more time in communication classes for other activities.

References

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Appendix 1

Vocabulary Questionnaire

Please circle how you feel. 当てはまるものに○をつけてください。

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. I learned a lot of useful vocabulary this semester.
今学期、多くの役立つ語彙を学んだ。 | strongly agree /agree/ neutral/ disagree/strongly disagree
5 4 3 2 1 |
| 2. I enjoyed the way I studied vocabulary this semester.
今学期、語彙を学ぶ方法を楽しんだ。 | strongly agree /agree/ neutral/ disagree/strongly disagree
5 4 3 2 1 |
| 3. The way we studied vocabulary this semester
matches my learning style.
今学期の語彙を学ぶ方法は私の学習スタイルに合っている。 | strongly agree /agree/ neutral/ disagree/strongly disagree
5 4 3 2 1 |
| 4. I feel I can remember and am able to use
most of the vocabulary I studied this semester.
私は今学期学んだ語彙の大半を覚えており、
使用することができる。 | strongly agree /agree/ neutral/ disagree/strongly disagree
5 4 3 2 1 |
| 5. I prefer last year's vocabulary learning style to
this semester's vocabulary learning style.
今学期の語彙学習方法よりも、昨年度の語彙学習方法
の方が好きだ。 | strongly agree /agree/ neutral/ disagree/strongly disagree
5 4 3 2 1 |
| 6. I prefer this semester's vocabulary learning style to
last year's vocabulary learning style.
昨年度の語彙学習方法よりも、今学期の語彙学習方法
の方が好きだ。 | strongly agree /agree/ neutral/ disagree/strongly disagree
5 4 3 2 1 |

PLEASE CHOOSE A or B (A か B のどちらかを選んで回答を記述してください。)

A: I prefer last year's vocabulary learning style to this semester's vocabulary learning style
because.....

今学期の語彙学習方法よりも、昨年度の語彙学習方法の方が好きだ。なぜなら…。

B: I prefer this semester's vocabulary learning style to last year's vocabulary learning style
because.....

昨年の語彙学習方法よりも、今学期の語彙学習方法の方が好きだ。なぜなら…。